

## TESTIFY

By Elizabeth Han

Cat, who was getting baptized at the end of the week in Chilliwack, called Jack after the interview. Seven people had gone ahead of her, including Jack's ten-year-old nephew and the baptismal teacher's son, forcing the day to run late. During the pandemic, even baptisms had been held, just like all the weddings, divorces, and funerals.

"Finally getting dunked," Jack had said. "But fourteen classes and an interview? My, things have changed from my time."

"They need to know that I know."

"You know when you know."

"Like us?"

The longest breadth of silence. Jack stopped pacing around his apartment in Yaletown, a habit he had developed in order to achieve his step count during the lockdowns. Cat always knew when he stopped pacing because the squeak of his Adidas slides would cease.

"We're dating," Jack said. "For evaluation. That's the point of Christian dating. We're still dating."

"Meaning?"

"That so far I know that I don't *not* want to marry you."

"That makes sense," Cat said quickly. She stared away from the phone at her unfinished testimony, which Rory, somewhere in his bedroom down the same street in Chilliwack, was

simultaneously editing in the Google Doc. She stared at the pair of pink and purple cursors on her laptop while holding the phone in her hand and typed a comment, *Can we talk?*

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Jack had been baptized when he was eighteen in the same church Cat now attended, before he'd moved to the city for work. His dad had been head deacon and his mom church secretary. His youth pastor said it wouldn't be a good look if he didn't. Jack wouldn't have to speak, if that was the issue. No, that wasn't the issue. Jack had plenty to say but speaking was just an invitation to get swarmed. For this reason, he had advised Cat, on the day of their seven-month anniversary, while out for dinner, to keep her testimony short. "Most people spend too long on the *before*. Be vague about all that other stuff and keep to what you're going to do."

"What I'm going to do when?"

"You know. In the *after*."

"What did you talk about?" Cat asked.

"That in the *after*, I would walk in the ways forevermore. And that I was grateful for *this*," and he had sliced his hand horizontally through the air.

Cat had always liked that about Jack, his love for his *straight-line* testimony. He and his friends had gotten sloshed a couple of times and played a game into their twenties when they would compete to see who could urinate on the funniest thing in town. But he'd never strayed. Not really. Every time he'd secured a girl's number in Chilliwack's one nightclub, just to see if he could, he woke up the next day and tossed it in the trash.

Once, Cat and Jack had passed a sign in the mall at Five Corners that said, “I wish I had met you sooner so I could have loved you longer.” When he pointed it out, she asked, “Is that how you feel?”

“I don’t think you would have liked me ten years ago.”

“Then why did you point it out?”

“Because it’s cheesy.”

“We would never want to be cheesy,” she said, starting to understand why he had waited so long to date.

Jack prided himself on being a virgin at thirty-six, waiting for The One Who Was Not Cheesy, while Cat had been pinned down by a football player, a male friend who had interned with her father before Papa had died. The sonofabitch had finally gotten caught much later, a child pornography case. Cat hadn’t said anything because she couldn’t prove it and never got the rape kit done, had wanted only to wash everything away in a skin-liquifying shower.

Once people heard the full story, including the other parts, like Papa’s death, Mama’s accident, and Cat dropping out of college—how she’d had to come to the end of herself to come to God—far too many of them would clasp her hands, weeping, “I wish I had a dramatic testimony like yours.”

“You don’t,” she said, “But thank you.”

Jack agreed that was the way to go about it and it wasn’t Christian to harbour anger at her rapist.

“Misery porn,” he said. “Just gotta get over it.”

Two weeks before, the baptismal teacher had had them all watch a movie in class, the crucifixion scene from *The Passion of the Christ*. Typically, the ages of the baptismal candidates ranged from sixteen and up. But Rory had received special dispensation because no one had ever seen a child that *certain*. He had even written up his testimony already, a personal story of faith, which each person would have to read aloud at the ceremony.

“Do you know who that was screaming at the moment Jesus died?” the teacher had asked.

“Satan, obviously,” Rory said. “In hell. But they could have made him look a little less like Voldemort. It’s so passé. Maybe they finally realized that so many images we conjure about heaven and hell are taken from Dante.”

The teacher opened his mouth and then closed it again.

Rory continued, “He could look like nothing at all. He could look just like us. That’s the scary part.” Rory was doodling a turtle in the margins of his workbook in the chapter on overseas missions. “Maybe he’s exactly like us, except eternally separated from God. That’s what hell really is.”

“Jack,” Cat had said once, after meeting his nephew at a family function. “Do you realize that Rory is some kind of savant?”

“What? Chase put him in gifted, if that’s what you mean.”

It wasn’t. Cat had dropped it. But what she meant was that the boy gave off a sense that he knew everything about everyone, including her, but kept it to himself. For instance, Rory never mentioned when they were put in prayer clusters at the class that he knew Cat was dating his Uncle Jack. Rory politely prayed for the other things she brought up, like her mother’s health,

the success of the baptism class, the unity of the church. Cat didn't want to tell a literal child that she was also praying for a proposal from Jack. Her mother had said that a Christian man couldn't be thirty-six years old, good-looking, with a steady job, and yet single. There had to be something wrong with him.

“It's been eight months. He's thirty-six. He's never been with anybody? Really?”

“That's what he says.”

“Well, that's just the problem,” her mother said. “You believe what he *says*. How does he kiss?”

Cat turned red. Jack did kiss like he'd done things before and sometimes his hands strayed lower than they should. But he had forgiven her for not being a virgin. She was so grateful.

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The same day as the viewing of *The Passion*, following the class, Cat, with comically clumsy fingers, had dialled an unfamiliar number and said, “Rory, I need your help.”

She had finagled Chase's contact info from the church directory, not wanting to ask Jack herself. Jack's older brother had not seemed surprised to hear her request, like people were always asking his genius kid for answers to their problems.

“Your testimony?” Rory had said. Chase said he'd been doing his maths homework when she called.

“It seemed to come very easy to you,” Cat said. “I thought, maybe...”

“I can help you with the structure and the language,” Rory said. “But the story has to be yours, right? Put it in a Google Doc and give me permissions to edit.”

Cat had spoken with the baptismal teacher multiple times but still had not written her testimony. Nor her essay to get back into school for counselling. Going to school for counselling had been the plan before the rape. It had been nearly six years, and yet the application stewed in its final stages. It seemed she couldn't get the right words for anything. Not when Jack was driving up from Vancouver for her “dunking” and his parents too. Not when Chase's wife Alicia, an RCMP forensics officer, had squeezed out four children in ten years, baked amazing sourdough, and always smelled like apricots. If Cat was to be accepted into this charmed Christian life, she must impress. The baptismal interview had been bad enough, even though the teacher had told them to write down the answers to the questions that would be asked.

“Don't worry. No one fails the baptismal interview,” the baptismal teacher had said. “Now write these down.”

“Unless,” Rory had said, leaning back in his seat and crossing his legs.

“Unless?”

“Unless they say they don't *want* to be baptized,” and Rory had looked at the laptop that represented Kelvin, the baptismal teacher's sixteen-year-old son, who Zoomed into the meetings and kept his camera off despite his father's good-natured entreaties and mealy-mouthed excuses. *Kelvin is shy. He will attend in person when he is ready.*

“What's that supposed to mean?” Kelvin's voice burst from behind his white name on a black background.

“Read the Bible,” Rory said flatly, and the boy had turned his blue eyes, the same as Jack's, for a moment upon Cat, arresting her heart in mid-beat, before returning to doodling.

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“Fuck me, that was cold,” Cat said later to Rory as they ate gelato, having agreed beforehand to meet to keep working on her testimony.

Rory had known Kelvin since Rory was five and Kelvin was ten and Kelvin had slammed a dodgeball straight at Rory’s head. Rory proclaimed, as he and Cat sat, his tongue making divots into the pistachio she had bought him, that the kid was a total fake. Kelvin was not getting baptized. He’d drag it out over months and years until his Daddy made him.

“Pastor Andy did say it’s a coupon,” Cat mused. “That as long as you’ve taken the classes, you can wait and redeem it later. If not next week, we can do it at Easter.”

Rory glowered. “Cat, he’s just hoping his dad will forget. Also, you have chocolate on your face.” He passed her napkins.

“Where did you get those?”

“Last month, when Uncle Jack got you soft serve, you had vanilla on your forehead.”

Jack had kissed it off. It was the family picnic. Cat had been wearing an eyelet white dress and bag he had given her and she had had many compliments on her figure. She didn’t think Rory had been watching, but of course he had. The seer.

Rory asked, “I read what you wrote but I still don’t get it. Did you go to college and find yourself and then it turned out you needed God? There are years that are unexplained. And then you’ve written just dot dot dot and *Jack*. He can’t be that important. You’ve just met.”

Cat was glad the ice cream bowl hid her expression and turned away to hide it in a sneeze. Was eight months *just meeting*? She thought Jack had told them about college. But anyway, Rory was a kid. Maybe it was kept just between the adults.

“I never finished college,” she said.

“I’ve been thinking college makes people too liberal. Kelvin’s probably going to college for engineering and it’s going to make him even more of a prat.”

As he said this, Rory suddenly rested his cone on a saucer and shook his head. His expression, Cat realized, was troubled, a crease in the pliant young skin of his forehead.

“Kelvin wants to be convinced through apologetics,” Rory said. “But how many people do you know who come to faith by apologetics? It’s testimony, Cat. It’s about the personal.”

“Yes, it is,” she said and without thinking about it, reached over to squeeze the boy’s sticky hand.

#

One of Cat’s girlfriends had turned her boyfriend’s place upside down looking for the ring and found it inside a Nike sneaker, and then sobbed to Cat that they had never talked about what she wanted, and so how could he have picked a sapphire with white diamonds on each side and a rose gold band when she preferred emeralds and white gold? Cat didn’t really care about the ring. And Jack’s place was sacrosanct, not a crumb anywhere, every appliance white, so that she even felt a little obscene kissing on his white leather sofa.

She also didn’t dare disturb the “pages.” The first time she’d been to the apartment in Vancouver, she’d noticed the enhanced New Testament open on the coffee table. A huge



chalkboard with thoughts about Ecclesiastes. An entire bookcase of volumes on apologetics. But she and Jack had spent about two minutes sitting on his sofa looking at their charcoal reflections on his blank mounted TV before his mouth fell upon hers and that was the end of that.

He had lightly scratched the side of her face as he told her to slow down, even as his pants tented and he had her blouse half unbuttoned, the metal front clasp of her bra glinting in the afternoon light.

#

In the Google Doc, Rory made little strikeouts, deleted some adjectives, added some verbs. It was five minutes before he replied to her comment bubble with, *What's up?*

*I don't think he believes*, she typed. Jesus. She almost shut the laptop lid.

She didn't even know what she was trying to say. Jack had said he had been waiting all his life for her, that she was the third strand of the cord that would not be easily broken, from Ecclesiastes 4:12. But his charming tongue always dervished around her, speaking constantly in so many double negatives so that her head whirled. What if he were only dancing a dance of expectation? Cat had heard Alicia whisper to Chase, when she thought no one was around, *Finally. Good God. He had to choose himself, didn't he. She's beautiful, I'll give him that.* Chase had shushed her for taking the Lord's name in vain. Let your yes be a 'yes' and your 'no' a no, right? Matthew 5:37. Of course Jack believed in *God*. But what about her?

The cursor blinked. The top of the document indicated [rory.witter@gmail.com](mailto:rory.witter@gmail.com) was editing in purple. You could mark a comment resolved. You could delete it.

Finally, Rory typed, *Kelvin is an idiot and an atheist and I can't tell which is worse.*

#

Jack had been a total gentleman when they first met. He had been visiting his parents when he'd seen Cat in his childhood church, standing beside her mother and singing with her hands held out. He had asked to be introduced and then taken Cat out to dinner—seafood, her favourite—and then a walk down the Vedder River, all the way to where the rich doctors in town lived.

At the river, they sat on a bench and Jack had remained silent as Cat said that Jack, as Deacon Witter's son, always known as *the catch who had gone off to Vancouver*, needed to know a few things about her, like why after Papa's death and her incident, Mama had moved them both out of the city and to the Bible Belt. She knew she looked very fine and together now, but just in case Jack Witter needed someone unblemished, free of scandal.

He pulled out his phone when she was finished and played a song. "Dance with me, Cat."

People came jogging along the path, others riding bikes with their kids, and he held her close as she trembled, facing the river.

Someone, an older woman wearing a baby, finally tapped Jack's shoulder and said, "We just saw you over there dancing and well, it was so sweet, and we just wanted to ask, did you just get married?"

"No," he said, laughing. "We're not married. It's actually our first date."

"Well, we hope you love each other like this forever."

"Mommy," the woman's other daughter said, a small girl eating a cupcake. "She's so pretty."

“Did you hear that?” Jack whispered in Cat’s ear later as she hid her cheek against his soft fleece sweater. “I’ve done well, wouldn’t you say?”

#

One week before the ceremony, Pastor Andy emailed that he wanted to read and approve all the testimonies beforehand, so Rory asked Cat for another draft as they talked on the phone with the Google Doc simultaneously opened. “I know he said under five minutes,” Rory said. “But there’s too much stuff about what you’re going to do with the Kingdom, how grateful you are, how you know you’re His child. Something’s not right.”

“I *am* His child.”

Cat had no idea why Rory chose not to say, “What aren’t you saying?” Instead, Rory typed it.

Underneath, she paused, before typing, *Gelato place still open*. Question mark.

Rory typed, *Don’t protect me*.

I’m protecting *me*, Cat thought.

*Just write it*, Rory typed. *Just like you’re writing to me now*.

But how could she? When Jack had seen the second latest draft the day before, which Cat deleted before Rory had had a chance to review, his face had turned ashen. “It’s too detailed.”

“Which part?” she said. He was standing, having driven down to Chilliwack on his day off, and she had had to look up at him.

“All of it.”

“Which,” she pressed.

“Catherine,” he said, suddenly gentler, in a voice he must have thought more kind. “I know you’ve told a few people here that you think you can trust. That you think that maybe some young person sitting there needs to know. But they don’t. My parents certainly don’t. Don’t make it about you.”

“It’s a testimony,” she said, the knowledge slowly saturating her, that he himself hadn’t said, not a word, not to anyone. “It’s supposed to be about me.”

“Everything of yours,” he replied, indicating skyward. “Is *His*.”

#

Cat typed. Cat typed on and on in the document, in one continuous paragraph and didn’t bother with the punctuation. In the deleted draft, she had written it much nicer, at least organized, but maybe this was what the truth looked like, after all: gory, ragged, undone. She missed the feel of Jack’s shirt when they had danced, as though no breadth between them then, no story. Rory’s purple cursor stayed labeled with his name at the top, near the ribbon to log in and out.

Then the phone rang. “He told you not to say this?”

“Who?” she said weakly.

“Oh, Cat,” Rory murmured.

#

Rory said that once, when he and Kelvin were still friends, Kelvin had taught him how to play soccer, explaining offside, onside, with such patience, using Lego pieces he had hanging around.

Then Rory had beat him, a perfect strike on goal. Then in chess. Then in stupid freaking Jenga. And Kelvin had bided his time, until the dodgeball incident.

Cat remembered the first time she had ever seen Jack, at church, standing with his parents, his oceanic blue eyes surging over her like a tide.

She remembered the first date, the marine melting of the oysters in her mouth, the chocolate mousse, the sky still bright at seven when they had walked along the rocky path of the Vedder. The place where the bank dipped and he had chuckled, leading her along the path through the bushes. And after all the compliments, the dancing, and the people, when he inched her into the river to accompany him on the hottest day of the summer, her red chiffon dress blooming on the surface, his blond hair wet, his smile like an implement of happiness that had suddenly and irrevocably pulled at her taffy heart, stretching and coaxing it to admit him. How free Jack had looked, his total immersion in it, and her belief, then, in water, in currents. In the going under. In the force of things that could be carried away.

END